

Every Step You Take by Chibirini1

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Summary:

Eleven's trials and successes in navigating the real world with her friends, boyfriend, and her new dad at her side.

1. Bras

The day had finally come. She was to step out into Hawkins as not a fugitive, but as a normal person. It was her first outing—a trip to the store for some clothes. She had outgrown the ones Hopper had gotten for her during the long summer she had to spend inside, and he admitted she needed different clothes if she was to fit in when she started at the high school. She enjoyed the overalls and t-shirts, but Hopper and Mike both said that she'd need a few sweaters if she was going to look normal.

She had never been so excited to ride in a car. She'd been out to the Byer's house more than a few times over the last year, but she always had to lie down in the back seat under a blanket. Now she sat in the front seat, and Hopper made her wear a seatbelt.

"Jim Hopper!" The saleslady greeted them as they stepped into the store. They appeared to be the only ones there and the saleslady, whose nametag read Beth, stepped forward eagerly.

"Hey Beth," Hopper said. He looked nervous, El thought.

"Who is this?" she asked, peering at Eleven through her glasses.

"This is my cousin's daughter, Jane Hopper. She's come to stay with me for a while. She needs some new clothes."

"El," Eleven said insistingly. Hopper frowned.

"But she goes by her middle name, Eleanor. El for short."

"I see," Beth said, smiling kindly as she took in El's faded overalls and oversized shirt. "Well, what exactly does she need?"

Hopper took off his hat and rubbed the back of his head. "Well, she's pretty much grown out of all she has...so, everything."

Beth's eyes widened and she nodded. "Alrighty then. Let's get to work then."

She took Eleven's measurements and helped her pick out some

sweaters, shirts, skirts, pants, and even a few dresses. El tried on everything, enjoying the new softness of each piece, and how it didn't smell like their cabin. She showed Hopper the clothes shyly, and he would nod approvingly at each piece. He never said anything, but she knew he liked them well enough.

However, when the lady asked her to take her shirt off in front of her, El refused.

"Sweetheart, you can't go to high school without a bra," Beth whispered, and El panicked. What was a bra? Why did she need to take her clothes off?

"No!" She said, a little too loudly, and Beth flushed. She quickly left Eleven in the little dressing room, and Eleven peeked out the curtain to see her go over to Hopper.

"Jim," Beth said in a hushed voice. "She won't let me measure her for a bra."

Hopper turned red, and El almost laughed. She hadn't seen him look that way ever.

"Does she need one?" he asked awkwardly, and Beth nodded.

"All the high school girls wear them, whether they have a large bosom or not."

He nodded slowly, and sighed. "I'll talk to her."

El shut the curtain and waited until Hopper came close to open it again.

"Hey kid," he said quietly. "You gotta wear a bra."

"What is a bra?" She whispered.

His eyes widened and he frowned in the same way he did whenever he discovered that she had missed something from living in the lab.

"It goes over your chest," he said. "It protects your...breasts."

Eleven looked down. The small mounds were barely distinguishable.

“Why?” she asked, a little irritated. Hopper didn’t wear anything on his chest.

He ran a hand through his hair and looked as annoyed as she felt.

“It’s like armor,” he finally whispered. “Just for girls.”

El’s eyes widened. “Armor? For what?”

“To keep others from looking. All girls wear them.”

She nodded solemnly this time, kind of understanding. Armor. She liked that, a little.

“I’ll get you anything from the store if you wear one,” he finally bargained. She liked the sound of that.

“Do I have to take off my shirt?” she asked, and he shook his head.

“No! She can measure you with your damn shirt on.”

El flashed him a shy smile. “Ok.”

When Beth returned, she measured El again—with her shirt on. She looked at El with pity though, which she didn’t enjoy, so Hopper must have told her something sad to let El keep her shirt on. She tried on all types of bras, disliking the feeling at first. But it was ok that it felt weird, she decided. It was just like when clothes felt weird after she wore that hospital gown for so long.

She picked out some sweaters and shirts, two skirts, two dresses, and four pairs of pants. She decided she liked the pants best. And then, just like Hopper promised, he let her choose anything she wanted from the store.

She looked around carefully. She had her bracelets that Hopper gave her—the one of Sara’s, and the gold one Hopper had gave to her the night of the Snowball. He had bought it just for her to wear with the new dress he had come home with. The dress was a little big last winter, and was probably the only thing that still fit El.

In the end, she picked out some sparkly barrettes. They were probably the most beautiful thing she'd ever seen.

Hopper paid for everything, and afterwards got her ice cream. He refused to get his own, but kept stealing bites of hers when she wasn't looking. He introduced her to a lot of people with curious eyes and cautious smiles. But she didn't mind. It was different when everyone was looking at her now. It wasn't like she was a freak or something to be studied. They simply looked at her like they didn't know what she was.

She liked that.

On the ride home, Hopper cleared his throat.

"Now, if you grow out of anything, we can just go get some more," he said. "If you need anything, you just have to ask, ok?"

El nodded and placed her hand on his.

"Thank you," she said quietly. He gave her one of his little half-smiles and didn't pull his hand away.

"You're welcome."

2. Nightmare

“Nancy.”

Something was tugging at her.

“Nancy!”

Something was waking her up. Something with black hair and a panicked expression.

“Huh, Mike? What is it?” Nancy asked, checking her clock for the time. It was 2am.

“El’s in trouble! She radioed me. You have to take me to the cabin, now!”

“Shit!” Nancy jumped out of bed and pushed Mike out of the way so she could open her underwear drawer, where she hid the gun she had used. Grabbing it, she looked Mike in his wide eyes.

“Let’s go,” she said.

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Hopper was sound asleep when the banging on the door started.

“Fuck,” he whispered, glancing over the cabin as he held a hand to his head. It was obvious a kid lived here. Hopper had gone a little overboard in allowing El some toys and things. She had action figures, a doll, crayons, puzzles, books, and even some of her clothes all over the place. There was no way that he could hide that she was here if the feds had finally come for her.

“El! It’s Mike!”

Now that was a whole other concern. Hopper marched to the door and flung it open, not even blinking as Nancy and Mike rushed through the door.

“What the hell’s going on?” he asked, and Mike hurriedly explained.

"Eleven radioed me and said she wasn't ok and asked me to come over," he said in a rush, staring up at Hopper.

"What? She's fine!" Hopper exclaimed.

"No I'm not," El said from her doorway creeping out into the light. "I had a nightmare."

"You're ok!" Mike said, rushing over to embrace her. She hugged him tightly, burying her face into his pajamas.

"Seriously?" Nancy said, putting her hands on her hips as she clicked the safety back onto her gun. "A nightmare?"

"Eleven, what the hell?" Hopper growled, and she frowned at him as she and Mike parted. "Why didn't you just come to me?"

He would have read to her, put her back to bed like he had countless times before. It was pretty common for her to have nightmares. Why call Mike all of a sudden?

But she buttoned her lip and lifted her chin, staring him down.

He stared her down right back until Mike interrupted.

"Can I just talk to her?" he asked. "Please?"

"Fine." Hopper didn't want to see her if she was going to be a smart-ass anyways. Maybe Mike would get something out of her.

So Mike and El went back into her room, but when El tried to close the door, Hopper slammed his hand on it to stop it.

"Leave it open," he told her as she glared.

He paced while they murmured. Nancy sat down at the table and sighed, playing with the gun.

"Where'd you get that?" Hopper asked suddenly. She stiffened, as if she was caught.

"Johnathan's dad's car."

Hopper looked over the girl. She had proven to be tough as nails, and a sharp shooter at that.

“Keep the damn safety on,” he told her.

He went back to peek at the slot in the door. Mike and El were curled up on the bed, facing each other like two parentheses. Mike was holding her hand, and murmuring softly. El was looking at him so openly, with such trust. It almost killed Hopper.

He had his hand in a fist and the other ready to slam the door open when he felt Nancy touch his sleeve.

“Hey,” she whispered. “Mike’s a good kid.”

Hopper stepped back from the door and looked at the thin girl. She was going with Johnathan Byers, and she had fought the demons of the Upside Down with them twice. He felt like he could trust her.

Before he could answer, Mike stepped out of El’s room, quietly closing the door.

“She’s sleeping,” he said simply, his dark eyes darting up to Hopper’s and back down again.

Hopper looked at him, looked at Nancy, and then finally made up his mind.

“Why...Why didn’t she come to me?” He asked. “Why’d she radio you?”

Mike shrugged, but then thought better of it. “She said you’ve been babying her ever since she closed the gate. She didn’t want you to think she was a little kid.”

Hopper choked out a laugh. “Of course I’ve been a little protective, I almost lost her! You didn’t see her collapse after she closed the gate.”

Mike looked down and shrugged again. “She just wants to feel normal. In control. She never was, at the lab.”

Hopper could see that. Always being poked and prodded, told to do

horrible things you didn't want to do. She never felt like she had a choice. He didn't want her to feel like that.

Nancy took Mike home and Hopper went and opened the door to El's bedroom just a tad.

It was a simple room, and she was covered in a faded but colorful quilt that had been Sara's. She had drawings all up on her walls, simple and crude ones drawn with crayons. She had a stack of books by her bedside, and a chair Hopper always sat in whenever he was invited into her room.

She was sleeping soundly, her curls tousled and strewn across her pillow around her head like a dark halo. Her face was peaceful, her body still curved as if she was one half of an unfinished circle that she and Mike had made together.

He looked at his girl, who was growing up too fast. He kept forgetting that she was fourteen when she had the curiosity and gaps of knowledge as a child. But, he guessed that just because she didn't know what pancakes were didn't mean she was still a little girl. He couldn't pretend that Eleven was Sara. Sara was gone, and now he had a teenager. A clueless teenager, but still a teenager none the less.

He closed the door, giving her her privacy. And quietly hoped that next time, she'd come to him after a nightmare. Just to give him a little more time before she grew up.

3. Love

All of El's friends came to visit her, but it was Mike that stuck. It was Mike who biked through a snow storm to see her, Mike who bought her that radio, Mike who invited her to the snowball, Mike who made her smile every single time. Damn that kid. Hopper couldn't stand it.

Young love. He remembered it. But it seemed silly and inconsequential now. El wasn't like him though. She was special. And she was his daughter, damn it. Why did it have to happen to his daughter?

He saw the way they looked at each other, all moony and trusting, like they couldn't imagine ever hurting each other. He saw the way they held hands all the time, clutching at each other like a lifeline. And the way she leaned into him, never going farther than that but he knew they would if he wasn't watching every second. Damn teenagers and their hormones.

If only it had been Will, or even that kid Lucas. Both of them seemed too afraid to push the envelope, too timid to try anything. But no. It had to be Mike, who had both guts and stamina.

Hopper had been terrified that all the kids would have moved on from her, but that clearly wasn't true. They were all loyal as hell, especially Mike, who radioed her every damn night for 353 days, never giving up hope. It was ridiculous, and it wasn't puppy love. It was serious, at least it was to Hopper.

He had argued about it with El, who didn't get the picture.

"I love him and you can't stop me!" She had screamed in his face after one particularly bad fight. Then she screamed and broke a damn window again.

After the snowball, things had only gotten worse. He heard through the grapevine—from Steve, who heard from Dustin—that El and Mike had kissed. And he wasn't happy about it. And El wasn't happy about him knowing.

"It was a secret," she said stubbornly, looking out from the doorway onto the porch, where Hopper was smoking.

"Well then you shouldn't have had your first kiss in front of 100 kids then," Hopper replied drily, taking a drag off his cigarette before stubbing it out. El was always at him to quit, and now he had to stop smoking in the house because she coughed every time he smoked.

"I didn't," she said, sounding smug. He glanced at her then got up to go inside.

"Yes, you did," he replied.

"No I didn't," she said stubbornly. "The first time was after the bath. When Will was gone."

Well shit. Shit shit shit. Hopper pushed her back into the house and slammed the door.

"Do you want Mike to keep coming over?" he asked loudly as he stomped to the kitchen for a bear.

"Yes!" She said, just as loudly.

"Then you have to cut this shit out! You're too young!"

She crossed her arms and frowned, her eyes narrowing. "I'm fourteen."

He threw his hands in the air. "Ok, then do some long division for me. Or tell me who the latest pop star is. I don't care, fourteen is too young."

"Lucas kissed Max!"

"Well it is up to their parents whether they want to quarantine them."

"You like that I don't know things! You want me to be a baby!"

He groaned and drew his hands over his face. "No, I don't."

“Yes you do! You said I could see Mike! Friends don’t lie—”

“Well guess what? I’m not your friend. I’m your—”

He stopped himself. He had shown Eleven the birth certificate and explained what it had meant, but they never really discussed the whole thing, not really.

But she was a smart girl. “What? You are *Papa*?”

“Really? Goddamn it. No. I’m not your damn papa. I’m your dad, ok? Dads are different than papas.”

She went quiet, thoughtful now.

“How?”

Hopper sighed. “Dads want what’s best for their kids. That’s why they make them do things they don’t want to do but need to do, like eating vegetables.”

El frowned and picked up the doll Hopper had gotten her and held it like it was a baby.

“Why? Why not like Papa?”

“Because Papa didn’t love you. He only cared about your abilities. Remember?”

“Yes.” A pause. “Do you love me?”

Hopper inhaled deeply.

“Yeah. I do.”

She was silent for a moment. “I love Mike.”

Hopper groaned and put his head down. El came around him and hugged his side, leaning her head against him. “I love dads too,” she said. “But Mike is a vegetable. He is good.”

Hopper looked at the big eyes of his daughter and sighed. Mike did make her happy. And isn’t that what he wanted?

“Ok.” He said, putting his arm around her. “Ok.”

Notes for the Chapter:

Please comment, it fuels the fire!

4. E.T.

Promises were very important to El. She never made a promise she couldn't keep. That's why she never promised not to drink syrup—it was her favorite drink. Perfect with Eggos.

But it's also why she never promised not to sneak out to see Mike. When Hopper told her not to, she just said, "We're not stupid."

She never said she wouldn't.

Hopper tended to stay late on the job, always coming home past six or even seven at night. Usually he radioed her, but today he told her specifically that he was staying late before she was already waiting for him. He'd be home by ten. She could have Eggos for dinner if she drank a glass of milk.

So she nodded—she'd eat the Eggos, drink the milk. But she wasn't staying here for sure. It was her chance to see Mike again without Hopper hovering.

As soon as Hopper left, she crawled under her bed and radioed Mike. They made the plans, and she felt a flutter of excitement bloom inside her stomach. He had to leave for school, but afterwards they would meet. Outside the cabin.

She crawled out from under her bed and tried to watch TV, but she was too excited. She took a bath—her favorite now that she didn't have to use them to find people. She picked out her favorite shirt—the blue checkered one. She combed out her curls and watched them bounce right back into place. And at 3:15 on the dot, Steve's BMW pulled up to the cabin.

She bounded out the door, her radio in tow. Steve waved her in and she laid down in the backseat, just like Hopper taught her to.

"Is that really necessary?" Steve asked, and El nodded.

"We aren't stupid," she said, and Steve snorted.

"I hope you know that I had to pass up studying with Nancy for this.

You're lucky I owe Mike a favor."

"A favor?"

"Yeah. He helped me get Nancy a kick-ass birthday gift a couple weeks back."

El still didn't really understand, but she didn't say anything. She peeked out the window at the budding trees, their leaves just beginning to unfurl. It was beautiful.

They finally arrived at the Wheeler's cul-de-sac, and El saw Mike waiting by the window. She waved, and he waved back, signaling her to come around the back.

"Hey," Steve said. "No funny business. I'll be back here by nine to pick you up."

She nodded and slid out the door.

"Be responsible!" Steve yelled through the window.

~

Mike snuck her back down to the basement, telling his mom he had a science project to work on. Then they both sat down in the fort.

"You smell nice," Mike said, and she gave him a shy smile.

"I took a bath."

"Oh. I hope it was ok."

She patted his hand reassuringly. "I like them now." Hopper has a big tub with four claw feet, and El never had to put her head under water.

"That's good. You wanna do a puzzle or something?"

El nodded, and they went to work on a picture of an alien from a movie. Mike excitedly described the movie to her and she simply nodded along as he spoke. She liked hearing Mike talk, especially

about things he was excited about. He was so...cute.

"And then E.T. says he'll always be with him and touched his head like this!" Mike reached over and poked El in the forehead, startling her a little.

"Oh, sorry."

"It's ok, Mike."

Mike nodded and then reached his hand over to touch El's.

"Hey, can I ask you something?"

She shrugged. "Yes."

"Do you know what boyfriends and girlfriends are?"

She nodded. "Like Nancy and Steve."

Mike made a face. "Well, more like Nancy and Johnathan now. She and Steve broke up."

"Broke up?"

"They aren't together anymore. They had a fight."

"Oh."

"Anyways...when we start school, will you be my girlfriend?"

She smiled. "Ok."

He gave her a big smile back. "Ok."

She stopped and then frowned. "Oh, wait. I can't."

Mike leaned back from her as if he were shocked. "What? Why?"

She looked down and frowned at her muddy laces. "I promised Hopper."

"Why would you do that?"

She felt her face go hot. "I didn't know what it meant. I didn't think we could do it."

"Well then, it doesn't count."

She shook her head. "Friends don't break promises."

Mike groaned and tilted his head back in frustration, his dark hair spilling over his forehead. El wanted to touch it.

"El, come on, he's not really a friend. He's like...a dad."

She smiled a little at that. "Yeah. My dad."

"So, kids always lie to their parents. It's like, tradition."

She poked Mike in the head. "Promise is a promise. You said that."

Mike scowled and brought his knees up to his chest. "Well, shit."

El leaned her head against her hand and sighed. "Shit," she echoed.

Mike played with a puzzle piece and El watched him, unhappy. She knew she had made Mike upset.

"How about this," Mike finally said. "We can be lovers."

She frowned. "What is lovers?"

"It's like boyfriend and girlfriend, but it's a secret. I read it in one of my mom's romance books."

El beamed at that and threw her arms around his neck. He smelled good, like soap and those cinnamon candies he kept eating.

She jumped on him so fast that they fell over, with her on top of Mike. The puzzle crashed to the floor, shattering into a million pieces. And then her lips were on his, and they were kissing, just like they did at the Snowball.

When she drew back, she saw the shocked look on Mike's face and scurried back to get off of him.

“S-sorry,” she said.

Mike gave her a huge grin. “That’s ok. I mean, that’s cool. We can do that.”

She gave him a shy smile.

Suddenly her radio crackled to life. “El? Where the hell are you?”

Uh oh. It wasn’t even nine yet!

“Oh shit,” Mike breathed.

El grabbed her radio and pressed the button. “I’m with Mike.”

Mike made a horrible face and hit his hand to his face.

She looked at him, confused.

“Kid, you’re in some deep shit if you are where I think you are.”

She smiled at Mike and made her voice high and scratchy just like Mike did earlier.

“I’ll be right here.”

5. Healing

Notes for the Chapter:

Sorry this is a little darker than the rest of my chapters, but it's near and dear to my heart. And all's well that ends well, right? Thanks for all the comments guys, I've been writing like crazy these past two days because of all the support I've gotten. Thank you all so much!

Eleven was used to surviving. She was used to eating like an animal, used to sleeping on the ground, used to not speaking for days, used to having her body and mind poked and prodded at. She was used to feeling like her life wasn't hers.

At night, when she slept in the woods, the faces of the men she'd killed haunted her. It was them who scared her the most, not the Demagorgon. Mike and the rest of her friends seemed far away, their acceptance hazy and slippery, eluding her. She remembered standing at Mike's window, hearing the bad people telling him how dangerous she was. How she was a liar, how she would hurt anyone.

It's not true. She wanted to say. She wanted to scream. Something in her wanted them all gone. But she remembered Papa's face when she was hurting that cat, how eager he was. It made her sick to her stomach, made her feel bad. She didn't want to do that anymore.

Out in the woods, she no longer was El, or Eleven. She was no one. She was just another animal, using what she had to survive. She didn't want to feel anymore.

She grew weaker, for she hated killing squirrels and rabbits for food. She slept only a little, haunted by nightmares of Papa and the bath and all the people she missed. The worst dreams were the ones where she dreamed that she was back in Mike's fort, warm and safe. She'd wake up with wet cheeks every time.

So when she found the food Hopper had left for her, she was desperate and eager for a sliver of hope that someone out there

wanted her. Was looking for her. With that sliver of hope, she followed Hopper to his truck, where he saw her and took her home.

It was her first home. She still ate like an animal and shied away from Hopper's touch, even though it was gentle. She still had nightmares. But he fed her again and again, read to her every night so she could sleep, brought her clothes and puzzles and books. And he slept outside the door of her room every night, just a few feet away with his gun under his pillow. The day he swore to protect her from the bad men was one she'd never forget.

Eventually she stopped feeling like an animal. The gnawing fear subsided, and Hopper's touch no longer was so threatening. She reached out and found Mike waiting and listening for her every night. She realized she wasn't so alone. Maybe she never was.

Sure, she and Hopper had their fights. She grew so tired of waiting, but nothing confused her more than Hopper's smile after their first fight.

"Glad you got your spark back, kid," he said, like he'd been waiting for the fight all along.

She left the cabin and came back. She left the cabin and found Mama and Kali, but she was always missing something. She kept looking for it out in the world, but Mama and Kali and Aunt Becky didn't fill that hole.

The moment she returned and found Mike looking at her with that smile and those big, sad eyes she felt that hole begin to stitch itself back together. When he held her in his arms, she felt like she did in the cabin; like she had found her home.

As Hopper embraced her and she smelled the same tobacco and soap smell, it was like the first bite of an Eggo—so good and familiar. She wanted to cling to the man and feel his hand on her curls again, wanted him to take the sadness of Mama and Kali away. They were her past. Hopper and Mike and the rest of the gang were her future.

She never felt the emptiness again. She never felt like giving up again. She never felt like she wasn't in control again. Her life was

hers, and just like the gate to the upside down, the hole in her heart was closed.